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The Wisconsin Multi-Owner Forest Stewardship Project

By Paul Pingrey

Conservation partners in Wisconsin are proposing a “Multi-Owner Forest Stewardship Project” as a countermeasure to forest fragmentation and other challenges facing private forestland owners. The project proposes knitting individual parcels of forestland back together through landowner cooperation on sustainable forestry planning and practice implementation.

Forest fragmentation is one of the greatest challenges we face for sustaining environmental, social and economic benefits that come from working lands. Private ownership surveys done by the US Forest Service indicate about a 2% annual growth in the number of woodland property parcels. The pace is even faster where recreational and residential property is in high demand. Large real-estate investment trusts operating in the state are actively carving up former forest industry lands into smaller parcels owned by individuals. Forest management often becomes irrelevant to small landowners, or they are uncertain about how to accomplish management if they are interested in maintaining the health of their forestland.

The concept might also provide solutions to other problems. These include budgetary constraints on increasing forestry assistance provided by state employees, changes in the Managed Forest Law where DNR will no longer provide free forestry plans to MFL applicants, and difficulty forest products companies have in aggregating timber from smaller parcels. Addressing ecosystem management opportunities at a landscape scale (across property lines) rather than traditional piecemeal efforts could become more practical with multi-owner efforts. Landowner cooperation might also yield higher timber prices, lower costs and access to certified forest products markets.

The framework of the Multi-Owner Project is still evolving, but at its simplest entails two main ideas:

1.) Sustainable Forestry Plans

A sponsor would organize a group forestry plan for a well-defined geographic area. The plan would include an overview or “umbrella” that describes the forest resource and recommended management options for habitat types in the area, dependent upon various ownership objectives. The umbrella portion of the plan would also cover opportunities to enhance high conservation values such as unique or endangered species, deer management, cultural features, watersheds, recreational trails, etc.

Forest reconnaissance and a simplified management schedule would be prepared for each landowner who subscribes to the group plan. The intent would be to provide each landowner with sustainable forestry advice at a lower cost than traditional “full blown” forest stewardship plans now required under MFL. In addition to being costly (averaging about \$700 each), many landowners say traditional MFL plans are more difficult to comprehend due to their length. The group plan approach would give each landowner simpler information directly applicable to their holdings.

2.) Practice Implementation

The sponsor would offer group harvest or other coordinated plan implementation services to its members. Group harvests could include landowners who subscribe to the group plan or others in the area who have traditional, full stewardship plans. Extra management practices such as tree planting, herbicide application or prescribed burning could be coordinated by a group sponsor.

Advantages of group harvests or other activities to landowners could be significant. The sponsor would handle details such as hiring professional foresters to designate harvests, getting competitive bids and administering sales. By aggregating timber, landowners are likely to receive better prices than they could if they each negotiated separately with timber producers. By being part of a group, landowners might be able to market smaller volumes of timber than would be operable alone. The group sponsor can exercise quality control by bringing in professional loggers to help landowners protect their property from damage. The group might participate in a forest certification program to gain recognition for their sustainable forestry work.

To test the practicality of these concepts, DNR and partners will be conducting three pilots over the next two years. Funding and in-kind services for the pilot projects are being provided by DNR, Cooperative Development Services, Wisconsin Family Forests, Clark Forestry Consulting, the Turner Foundation, the Weyerhaeuser Family Foundation and a federal Forest Stewardship grant. Other groups, businesses and individuals may become involved in the pilots as recruitment proceeds.

One pilot is likely to be located in the Baraboo area and another tentatively in the Door County vicinity. Stora Enso has volunteered to conduct a third pilot within its central sands Stora Enso Family Forest program. Each pilot aims to involve twenty to thirty landowners in a group plan. A combination of private consulting foresters, DNR foresters and industrial foresters would provide the planning and harvest assistance.

Professor Mark Rickenbach of the University of Wisconsin will be surveying the pilot participants to ask for their perceptions of how the concepts work. By 2007, DNR hopes to have enough information to help guide development of a long-term program.

If the pilots prove effective, the possibilities for a long-term program could be exciting. It might be viable, for example, to create a new tier within MFL for landowners who participate in group plans. Additional MFL incentives for groups could include features like a shorter contract period (perhaps 15 years since management schedule updates would be more efficient than rewriting current 25 or 50 year full plans), yield taxes based on actual competitive bid prices, or more allowance for high conservation values on individual parcels.

Funding could include a mixture of landowner fees and state support to keep landowners' costs low. Some people have suggested that private non-governmental organizations (like Woodland Owner Association Chapters, Family Forest Alliances, or wood cooperatives) or private businesses would be desirable sponsors. Others have countered that local government (like County Land Conservation Departments, RC&D Councils or town government) would be more reliable group sponsors. Any of these approaches are wide open for exploration. There will be many opportunities in the months ahead for public input about features of a long-term multi-owner program.

In addition to organizing the pilot projects, Gerry Mich will be coordinating public awareness for the Multi-Owner Forest Stewardship Project. Mich is the Wisconsin Family Forests Executive Director and past chair of the Wisconsin Woodland Owner Association Wolf River Chapter. He can be reached at telephone 920-424-7888 or e-mail (gerry@wisconsinfamilyforests.org).